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# Dialogue in Scotland?

A forum with communication practitioners

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Queen Margaret University

EDINBURGH

## The Dialogue Forum

On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of June 2009 a group of 30 communication practitioners, organisational leaders, academics and policy makers met at Queen Margaret University (Edinburgh) to explore the role of dialogue in Scotland. What follows is a review and commentary of the practical and theoretical issues that emerged during the Forum.

### 1. The concept of dialogue

The confusion that surrounds the concept of dialogue was a key concern at the Forum. Dialogue is often used in ordinary language as a synonym of conversation. In addition, the concept is often overstretched and overused in public and corporate contexts.

In this respect, the members of the Forum posed a very useful question. Is dialogue a philosophy, a process or an event? Depending on what tradition we follow, communication scholarship tells us that dialogue is each of those things. Let us take them one by one in reverse order.

For some, dialogue is a particular type of episodic event that is facilitated through a series of systematic steps, following a specific set of rules (i.e. Bohm 1996; Isaacs 1999; Ellinor & Gerard 1998; Yankelovich 1999; Dixon 1998; Herzig et al. 2006). In this view, dialogue refers to a format (or 'safe space') where people sit in a circle and enter experimental dynamics of mutual inquiry. For these practitioners, 'doing dialogue' is characterised by the avoidance of confrontational speech, the suspension of reciprocal assumptions and the search for common ground.

For others, dialogue is a process that may entail a variety of formats. For example, the Cupertino Community Project was a multiyear process where a range of citizens were trained as facilitators. Multiple participatory activities took place in schools and local venues, nurturing a process of collective reflection on the challenges and possibilities faced by an increasingly multicultural community (Spano, 2001). These practitioners talk about 'fostering dialogic communication', rather than 'doing a dialogue'. Accordingly, debate, argumentation, dissent and discussion can

*"Is dialogue a philosophy, a process, or an event?"*

be part of a dialogue process as long as they are underpinned by the recognition of the legitimacy of different positions and values. They describe dialogic communication as ‘remaining in the tension between standing your own ground and being profoundly open to the other’ (Pearce & Pearce, 2004:46).

The third way of understanding dialogue is as a philosophy or ethos. Two classic philosophers from the early 20<sup>th</sup> century have had a major influence here: Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) and Martin Buber (1937). Bakhtin understands dialogue as a defining quality of human being, ‘the irreducibly social, relational, or interactional character of all human meaning-making’ (Stewart & Zediker, 2000:225). In contrast, for Buber (1937) dialogue refers to a special kind of contact. He divides human interaction in two types of relationship. The first, *I-It*, is instrumental and strategic: ‘many interpersonal relations are really characterised by one person’s treating the other as an object to be known and used’ (Friedman, cited in Cissna & Anderson, 2001:50). The second, *I-Thou*, is a state of mutual recognition, openness and responsiveness. Here, dialogic communication occurs in moments of high quality contact between human beings that recognize their uniqueness and difference. It means entering a partnership of authenticity that transcends the realm of appearance: ‘people must communicate themselves to others as they really are’ (Cissna & Anderson, 2002:53). Buber thought that it was not legitimate for him to intend to change the other, if he wasn’t opened to be changed by the other himself.

This oversimplified categorisation (format, process, philosophy) does not do justice to the vast terrain of dialogue scholarship and practice. An example of a practitioner whose worldwide influential work has cut across the three categories was the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire (1970). For him, dialogue must be embedded in an egalitarian ethos oriented towards the pursuit of social justice. In that sense, it is a process of empowerment of the disenfranchised and oppressed, through educational formats that subvert traditional hierarchies of knowledge and social relationship.

The definition of dialogue in the *Encyclopedia of Communication Theory* attempts to integrate the three perspectives hereby outlined: ‘From a communication perspective, dialogue represents a form of discourse that emphasizes listening and inquiry, with the aims of fostering mutual respect and understanding. Dialogue allows communicators to become aware of the different ways that

individuals interpret and give meaning to similar experiences. It is viewed as a dynamic, transactional process, with a special focus on the quality of the relationship between participants' (Broome 2009).

## 2. Qualities of dialogue

Whether it is understood as a format, a process or a philosophy, most scholars and practitioners agree in some fundamental qualities of dialogue:

- Transparency and disclosure
- Inclusiveness and egalitarian participation
- Quality listening
- Respect and openness
- Search for common ground and exploration of differences
- Balance of advocacy and inquiry

At the Forum, participants made very relevant points around the idea that dialogue should be 'grown' rather than 'rolled out'. In other words, this kind of communication qualities cannot be mandated, they must be nurtured through bottom-up reflective processes.

The Forum also debated the role of advocacy: can you be both an advocate and take part in dialogue? For those who see dialogue as a format where assumptions must be suspended, advocacy hinders inquiry. However, those who see dialogue as a broader process argue that dialogue is not a type of communication, but a quality that can be fostered in multiple formats and dynamics:

'When communicating dialogically, one can listen, ask direct questions, present one's ideas, argue, debate, and so forth. The defining characteristic of dialogic communication is that all of these speech acts are done in ways that hold one's own position but allow others the space to hold theirs, and are profoundly open to hearing others' positions without needing to oppose or assimilate

*"Can you be both  
an advocate and  
take part in  
dialogue?"*

them. When communicating dialogically, participants often have important agendas and purposes, but make them inseparable from their relationship in the moment with others who have equally strong but perhaps conflicting agendas and purposes (Pearce & Pearce, 2004:45).

In relation to this, the Forum also questioned the dialectic between dialogue and action. Is dialogue the opposite of action? Can it happen in the midst of action? We would argue that, actually, dialogue is action. It is the action of inquiring and co-constructing the meanings and implications of a given issue. It is the action of trying to understand what is at the heart of the matter for each person involved. When a conflict emerges in our family, our organisation or our neighbourhood, and traditional bargaining, negotiation or persuasion produce blockage, we may want to try a dialogue process (see Littlejohn & Domenici 2003). Is that not a form of action?

*“Is dialogue  
the opposite of  
action?”*

### 3. Imperatives of pragmatic communication

Of course the question above is rhetorical. When the Forum spoke about dialogue as inaction, it had a different idea in mind. Dialogue is time-consuming, and it may be seen as inaction or paralysis if we judge it by the current standards of our speedy lives. That is a fair point; it seems rather difficult to use dialogue as a managerial technique capable of timely implementation and delivery of outcomes.

In addition, committing resources to a lengthy open-ended process poses significant dilemmas for organisations. A dialogue process implies sharing responsibility and power among the stakeholders. This is not always possible or even desirable. As one participant in the Forum put it: ‘If dialogue is about thrashing out whatever needs to be thrashed out, rather than moving the organisation in the direction it needs to move, then this is sometimes problematic’. Indeed, if the direction is clear then perhaps dialogue is not the way to get there; an information, negotiation or consultation process will be better. However, if the ultimate goal is undetermined, and a consensual formulation of the general purpose is possible (i.e. ‘improving the community’), then perhaps there is room for the collective exploration of what that means and the co-construction of the process to get there.

The Forum was especially concerned about the imperatives of decision-making in organisational and public activity. Here scholars and practitioners are divided. Some postulate that dialogue must be clearly separated from decision making (i.e. Bohm; Isaacs; Yankelovich) so that inquiry dynamics, rather than advocacy, predominate. Others understand that deliberative decision making can be guided by dialogic qualities ('deliberative dialogue'; Escobar 2009). In this sense, a phase dedicated to dialogue - where the focus is on co-producing understanding of the issues and building relationship - may set up the scene for posterior weighting of alternatives and decision-making. In a similar way, the Canadian Government adopts an integral model where public dialogue 'strives to inform policy and program development with an expression of citizens' underlying values' (Centre for Public Dialogue, 2000, p. 4).

*"Is dialogue  
an end in  
itself?"*

A participant in the Forum asked: 'Is dialogue an end in itself?' We would say that sometimes it is; sometimes building understanding and relationship is what is needed. For instance, in an organisational context where a group of people is unable to work as a team due to interpersonal conflicts, dialogue may be seen as a worthy end in itself. The same may apply to the context of a neighbourhood with conflictive intercultural relationships. In cases like this, sustained dialogue may enable future collaborative decision-making platforms.

Another important point raised at the Forum was to do with the constraints impinged on dialogue by strongly predetermined agendas: 'Most initiatives with allocated resources are driven by the need to achieve specific outcomes and therefore agendas are in place; how do you engage in real dialogue when agendas are predetermined?' Others commented: 'Most communication processes don't start with a blank piece of paper' '[You] need to be honest about the parameters' and '[You] must be clear about what's negotiable and what's not'. These are very sensible comments that reflect clear challenges. As a first response, we would say that in most such cases dialogue may not be appropriate or possible. If the agendas are rigid and the process is a battleground for strategic aims, then traditional negotiation, bargaining and persuasion may be the only possible road. However, it may be worth noting something here. Long before negotiations started and decisions were taken, people involved in peace processes in places like South Africa or Northern Ireland spent years sustaining unconditional dialogue (Isaacs 1999).

*"How do you  
engage in real  
dialogue when  
agendas are  
predetermined"*

In our view, there is no such thing as a meeting without agenda; if its purpose is to foster understanding and relationship, this constitutes already an agenda. So the matter is not the existence of agendas, but what kind of agendas and how transparent they are. Indeed, as most Forum participants agreed, transparency in relation to purpose and parameters is crucial to establish a solid starting framework for fostering trust through dialogue.

But, the Forum asked, ‘how do you establish trust when there are motives behind creating dialogue in the first place?’ In many cases, it is a matter of facilitation expertise and technique. For instance, in conflict resolution facilitators will spend a considerable amount of time researching the issue and getting to know the stakeholders before they bring everyone together for a dialogue process (Littlejohn & Domenici 2003). Another example is the model devised by the Public Conversations Project, which has promoted hundreds of dialogue events with ‘pro-life’ and ‘pro-choice’ citizens, Jews and Palestinians, and so on. In their work, investing time in building relationship by, for instance, sharing meals and personal stories, is of capital importance to create the right atmosphere for emotionally charged conversations (Herzig et al., 2006). There are dozens of formats and techniques and, of course, they need to be adapted for each occasion. In any case, they require skilful facilitators capable of creating a safe space for interpersonal communication. Among other things, context is a central factor.

*“How do you establish trust when there are motives behind creating dialogue in the first place?”*

## 4. Context

Many of the arguments made during the Forum stressed the importance of context and understanding favourable conditions and spaces for dialogue. For instance, a dialogic approach to communication seems to work well in the charity sector because, as a participant put it, it is about ‘empowering, hearing people, listening to experiences, learning from experience, building consensus or at least agreeing to disagree – it’s part of our culture’. Other voluntary sector participants agreed that there is an ethos of empowerment in this arena. However, they also acknowledged that volunteers are passionate and that passion will also involve the need to pursue particular agendas. If agendas are not met, then volunteers may leave. This is not necessary



incompatible with dialogue. As we have said, dialogue is appropriate to develop a number of agendas: achieve deeper collective knowledge about an issue, build understanding across divides and create platforms for collaborative policy making.

In the same line, the Forum asked whether dialogue only takes place in certain contexts. Actually, the literature from dialogue scholars and practitioners covers a vast array of areas; for instance:

- Citizen and community engagement (Spano, 2001; Pearce & Pearce, 2000; Pearce, 2002; Zoller, 2000)
- Collaborative policy making (Innes & Booher, 2003, 2010; Helling & Thomas, 2001)
- Educational settings (Pearce & Pearce, 2001; Hyde & Bineham, 2000; Burbules, 1993; Freire, 1970)
- Conflict resolution (Littlejohn & Domenici 2003), public controversies (Herzig & Chasin, 2006 ; Gergen et al. 2001) and polemic science (Roper et al, 2004)
- Organisational and business settings (Shaw, 2002; Isaacs, 1999, 2001; Yankelovich 1999; Ellinor & Gerard, 1998; Dixon, 1998)

Given the challenges involved in crafting a dialogue process, the Forum raised specific concerns around how the media may prevent meaningful dialogue from taking place. Admittedly, the media tend to frame information in simplistic ways, which makes it difficult to put across complex and nuanced arguments. Many Forum participants agreed that better dialogue can take place if it is not been conducted in the glare of the media. This notion is shared by philosophers of dialogue like Martin Buber (Cissna & Anderson, 2002), who argued that the media spotlight does not allow the high quality contact needed for dialogue; this has been very clear in failed peace processes such as the one in the Basque Country (Spain).

All in all, dialogue organisers may find it extremely hard to convey the depth of the process in a sound bite. Moreover, the tendency of media to pursue agonistic narratives may also give place to the usual framing of the conversation as confrontation and strategic bargaining; or more simply, partisan politics. Pearce (2002, p. 81)

*"The media may prevent meaningful dialogue from taking place"*

offers an illustration of this relationship with the media in the case of a city-wide dialogue process in the state of California:

‘...a public dialogue process requires support from the “top” for initiatives from the “bottom” [...] Civic engagement requires, elicits and supports a different kind of leadership by elected officials and city staff. A story from San Carlos illustrates how unusual this model of leadership is. The local press learned about the Quality of Life Project, and called Sylvia Nelson, the Mayor, to ask what would be the result. As Sylvia recounted the story, the ensuing conversation left the reporter scratching his head. He expected a list of the Mayor’s pet projects, but instead, Sylvia replied by saying that she didn’t know what the outcome would be; in fact, it was important for her not to know since the process itself was designed to determine those outcomes. This answer was incomprehensible [...] What do you mean you don’t know the outcome, she was asked, incredulously. I’m sure that the reporter left wondering what in the world was going on in San Carlos.’

This story takes us to another crucial point highlighted during the Forum: leadership. Dialogue in organisational and policy making contexts requires a new kind of leadership. Yankelovich (1999, p.13) calls it ‘relational leadership’, ‘where the defining task of leaders is developing webs of relationships with others rather than handing down visions, strategies, and plans’. Pearce (2002, p. 81) elaborates on what this kind of facilitative or shared leadership implies:

‘The all-too familiar DAD model of public communication (“Decide – Defend – Advocate”) is initiated when some person or group commit themselves to bring about some predetermined policy. Leadership in this model is expressed by analyzing the situation, selecting an appropriate response to it, and championing the “right policy” in a way that garners sufficient support to get it enacted. In a public dialogue process, leadership is expressed by championing the “right process” so that the energies, creativity, and wisdom of the whole community are brought to bear. The leader becomes a custodian or curator of the process...’

Policy making contexts are particularly challenging because of their short term cycles. Depending on nature and scale, dialogue can obviously take longer than standard consultation or unilateral decision making. However, these traditional forms of policy making may, in turn, produce conflict which will considerably extend the

*“Dialogue in organisational and policy making settings requires a new kind of leadership”*

length of the process anyway; or even worse, they may result in blockage and, ultimately, inaction.

In the light of all the arguments above, there are a number of circumstances and contexts where dialogue may be more likely to flourish:

- When the issues and values at stake are complex, emotionally charged and potentially divisive.
- When there is room for creativity, innovation and out-of-the-box thinking.
- When there are multiple viewpoints that must be heard and decisions are better taken collaboratively.
- When there is time and commitment to the process.
- When facilitative/relational leadership is in place.
- When transparency and disclosure is possible.

## 5. Dialogic process

We will look now at key features of dialogue as a small group format, and as a large scale process. This will only be a schematic outline, intended to give a general account of both.

### How may a small group dialogue look like?

- Independent facilitation is required. However, this may happen in a variety of ways. For instance, in local engagement, members of the community may be trained as facilitators and conveners so that the process becomes embedded and sustainable.
- It is important to craft a safe space through exhaustive preparation (organisational logistics; mapping stakeholders; sometimes interviews with the participants; research of the background for the conversation: actors, relationships, milestones)

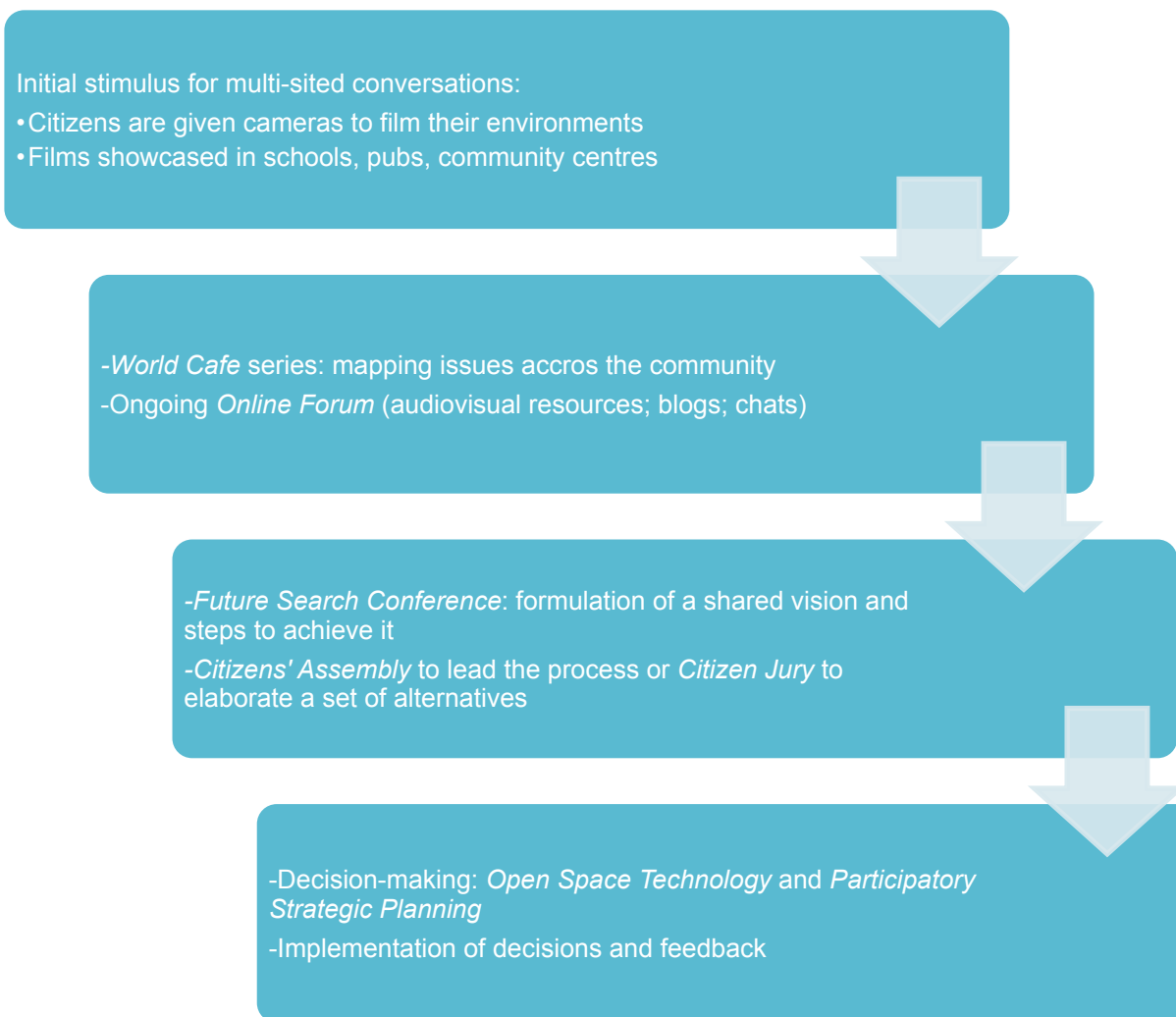
- A dialogue session should take less than 2 hours and include a maximum of 8 participants
- The participants establish engagement agreements on how the conversation will be conducted (the facilitator proposes guidelines and ensures compliance)
- The aim is to foster learning and creativity, and to build trust and relationship
- Participants are invited to
  - focus on the issues rather than the positions
  - balance advocacy and inquiry (questioning with genuine curiosity, rather than as strategic attack)
  - talk on their own behalf (instead of representing others)
  - speak from their own experiences, linking their views to their life stories (rather than abstractions); storytelling is crucial
  - suspend automatic response, judgement and assumptions
  - focus on listening for learning and reflecting (without having to immediately oppose or assimilate what is being heard)
  - help each other to unpack each other's assumptions
  - find common ground
  - see conflict and difference as a place for further exploration (rather than as an obstacle)

### How may a large dialogue process look like?

Perhaps the following distinction will help us to grasp the spirit of the process in the public context. The Public Dialogue Consortium distinguishes between three models of public engagement, namely, public education, public deliberation and public dialogue. The following table from Pearce (2002, p.39) illustrates the point:

	<b>PUBLIC EDUCATION</b>	<b>PUBLIC DELIBERATION</b>	<b>PUBLIC DIALOGUE</b>
<b>When is the public involved?</b>	At the end of a process, after decisions have been made	After the issue has been framed but before decision has been reached	Before the issue has been framed
<b>How are they involved?</b>	Marginally – the public indicates their approval or disapproval of a pre-existing decision	The public engages in 'choice work' by deliberating the pros and cons of previously framed issues	The public and elected officials work together to frame, deliberate, and decide issues
<b>What abilities are required of the leaders and of the public?</b>	Good persuasive abilities – the leaders must convince the public about the soundness of the decision	The ability to frame the issue fairly and listen to the public	The ability to share power and information with citizens and act on the information generated from the meetings
<b>What 'gets made' in this form of decision making?</b>	At best: public compliance. At worst: an angry and apathetic public; cynicism; overworked elected officials	At best: the public knows that they have been heard. At worst: if their decision isn't implemented, they know that they haven't	At best: trust, respect, shared power among citizens and elected officials. At worst, a long and potentially expensive process

Although many agree that scaling up dialogue presents challenges, practitioners from the Public Dialogue Consortium understand that dialogue can combine multiple formats and dynamics. In their work, dialogue is a process intended to create spaces for all stakeholders to be involved in dialogic conversations about the formation, discussion and decision of issues. We have tried to illustrate this multilayered process with the following composite example of a two-year town regeneration project.



It is beyond the scope of this paper to give a detailed account of the dozens of formats available for citizen participation (some examples are mentioned in italics in the figure above). By the same token, we cannot enter here into an exhaustive treatment of public dialogue stages and facilitation techniques. The interested reader may contact us to gather further information and resources, which we have developed for our training courses for communication practitioners.

## 6. Power issues

Although we have touched strategic agendas and leadership, there are – as the Forum pointed out – many other power issues that must be taken into consideration. For instance, organisational settings present major obstacles for the effective enactment of dialogue. They arise, as Oswick (2007) puts it,

‘due to the asymmetrical power relationships that pervade organizations (e.g., the power imbalance between managers and subordinates). In such situations, the subtle and sometimes unintentional exercise of power can lead to the subordination or suppression of an alternative view and, as a result, dialogue (i.e., a process of mutual and democratic engagement) typically gives way to consultation (i.e., both parties are involved, but the party with the leverage ultimately controls the final outcome)’.

However, scholar-practitioners such as Isaacs (1999), Yankelovich (1999), Dixon (1999) and Ellinor & Gerard (1998), have written extensively on methods and techniques to overcome such barriers in organisational settings.

Dialogue in the public sphere presents further challenges. Let us outline a response to those expressed at the Forum. Here we draw on the reflections published elsewhere by one of the members of our team (Escobar, 2009).

The principles and practices of dialogue entail communication dynamics that go beyond the controlled citizen participation with which many are comfortable. Wood (2004: xx) warns that ‘those who enjoy power and privilege often feel no motivation to interact dialogically with those who do not benefit from the same status and advantage’, and quotes Chantal Mouffe: ‘no amount of dialogue or moral preaching will ever convince the ruling class to give up its power’. Indeed, despite remarkable examples where dialogue has challenged the status quo (i.e. Innes & Booher, 2003), the term has been often co-opted by powerful economic and socio-political actors. In this sense, it is important to notice the distortion produced by the abuse of the term, too often used to name almost any kind of public process, regardless of its actual practices. Wierzbicka (2006) has warned that the transformative potential of the concept is at risk, and may end up meaning ‘manipulation, propaganda or pseudo-communication’.

This raises the question, made at the Forum, of who is in a position to create **safe spaces** for dialogue. Two fundamental figures play a central role here: the facilitators and the conveners.

*Power issues in  
organisational  
settings and the  
public sphere*

The reader would have gathered by now that, in our view, it is important to have independent facilitation. In practical terms this means that the facilitators must be regarded as independent by all the stakeholders. One exception is the case of processes where members of the community are trained as facilitators. Nonetheless, they will have to receive training on the techniques - and develop the mindset - that will help them to operate comfortably and with fairness and transparency.

The case of the convener(s) is more complicated. The contrast between '**invited and invented spaces**' (Cornwall, 2002, 2008) reminds us of the limits imposed on participatory processes by governmental agents, in opposition to more open initiatives developed collaboratively from the bottom-up. Some have argued that much of the failure of these processes in the UK stems from their top-down nature (Cornwall, 2008). The proliferation of 'invited spaces' has created the suspicion that some of them are disguised public relations exercises, instead of genuine opportunities for citizen participation (Ibid.). The history and reputation of the convener(s) will play, of course, a vital role in providing credibility to the project.

Then there is the issue of how to create **truly inclusive public dialogue**, capable of bringing to a minimum the socio-economic barriers to civic participation. Indeed, societal, structural and procedural factors must be taken into account. However, from a communication's perspective, it is also important to consider what happens during the conversation, in particular, what forms of expression are privileged and which ones are excluded. This concern regarding communication dynamics comes from understanding that exclusion can still take place even when we have managed to get every stakeholder in the room. This is what Iris Marion Young calls '**internal exclusion**' (2000). For example, an emphasis on logical argument will privilege those who are more articulated, and will neglect the contribution of those who are not. An emphasis on rational rhetoric will dismiss those who are unable to conform to such standard and that resort, for instance, to emotional appeal. In many cases, the less articulated participants may be unwittingly silenced; or even worse, they may recur to self-censorship in order to avoid frustration, embarrassment or group dismissal.

There are a number of ways to avoid this kind of situations. Let us outline some of them; for instance, using **narratives and**

*"Who is in a position to create safe spaces for dialogue?"*



**storytelling**, and allowing space for emotionality and alternative ways of knowledge (i.e. experiential, local).

In the case of narratives, some legal theorists have shown that they contribute to challenge hegemonic views and express the 'particularity of experience' (Young, 2000, p. 71). Research from Ryfe (2006) also shows how storytelling contributes 'to lower the structural, psychological, and social barriers to deliberation' in small groups. It also helps 'to develop and sustain situated identities', which determines whether individuals feel compelled to engage in the process or not. Stories contribute to sense-making around complex issues, as the participants understand how these 'play out in the real world even when they lack full information'. Finally, it helps with the relational aspects, and 'allow individuals to manage politeness issues in a context that privileges disagreement' (pp.80).

On the other hand, as Fischer (2009) has argued, too much effort often goes into trying to neutralise emotions, passions and identities in the name of rational reasoning and the logic of the better argument. In a similar vein, Sanders (1997) postulates that the rational weighting of reasons connoted by the traditional notion of deliberation has historically excluded those who do not master the method of logical debate. Mansbridge et al. (2006:5) conclude that "[R]equiring legitimate deliberation to be 'reasoned' [...] implicitly or explicitly excludes the positive role of emotions in deliberation". Fischer (2009) takes the argument farther and explains how, according to neuroscience, certain emotions trigger rather than prevent reason. Accordingly, he argues that citizen's commitment to participation in dialogue may actually depend on emotional dispositions.

This increased attention to the emotional side of public dialogue aims to complete our understanding of the social dimension of the individual engaged in a public dialogue process. It also provides a more complex take on communication. Rosenberg (2007) maintains that some cognition and reasoning assumptions made by deliberative theory have been notably discredited by empirical research. Individuals do not generally think in a logical, reasonable and rational way (p.344), and neither can we understand communication without the emotional dimension that is at the heart of interpersonal relations: 'exchanging narratives about personally significant life episodes, sharing meals together and participating in activities designed to create a sense of group identity may be necessary to creating the emotional connection

*The importance  
of storytelling  
and emotional  
engagement*

needed to motivate the kind of argument desired. The key here is to recognize that deliberation also requires conditions that foster emotional engagement, mutual nurturing and an affective tie to one's community' (pp.348-9).

All in all, we are not arguing that public dialogue can prescind of logical reason and articulated argument; that is, of course, nonsensical. We know that narratives and emotions can be deceiving, but so can be arguments as well (Young, 2000, p. 79). What we argue is that articulated arguments must co-exist with other modes of expression, and that a 'safe space' for dialogue must facilitate various forms of engagement, so that everyone's views can be heard in spite of how they are expressed. That is to say, the focus must be on what is communicated, not in how it is uttered.

The Forum shared multiple concerns with regard to the interaction between policy makers, experts and lay citizens. Both dialogue and deliberation scholar-practitioners have pondered over how to counter the dominance of expert knowledge in traditional policy making arenas. Citizens' juries are a good example of a deliberative format designed to give the participants control over the process. The expert's role here is to answer questions and challenges, to present evidence, and to provide advice when it is required by the members of the jury. The underlying principle is that taking only into account the knowledge of the experts 'is inadequate to the resolution of policy problems, since the issues such problems raise are also political and ethical' (Barnes et al, 2007:36).

*The challenges  
of interaction  
between policy  
makers, experts  
and lay citizens*

As Fischer (2000) argues, the **tension between professional expertise and democratic governance** is a crucial dimension of our time. Hence, it is necessary to create scenarios where citizens' voices are not neutralised by asymmetric relations with the experts. Privileged expertise prevents the inclusion of local knowledge and normative interpretation in the policy making process (Fischer, 2003). In contrast, opening spaces where professional knowledge and lived experience are combined helps to form an interpretive community which seeks - through mutual discourse - 'a persuasive understanding of the issues under investigation' (pp.222). For this to be possible, traditional policy making must relinquish its 'elaborately constructed aura of expertise' and 'the reluctance to include lay citizens in technical policy deliberations' (DeLeon, 1995; cited in Clarke, 2002:5).

This change in the role played by experts requires not only a change of values, attitudes and practices, but the abandonment of the privileges afforded by traditional hierarchies of knowledge (Yankelovich, 1999). Conventional public debate, where the voice of the experts is often venerated and dominant, prevents a more comprehensive take on social issues. An enriched dialogic approach should bring to the decision making table a combination of data, values, normative interpretations, and local and personal experiences. In the words of Yankelovich (1999, p.191), 'The methods of science and professional expertise are excellent for generating factually based knowledge; the methods of dialogue are excellent for dealing with this knowledge wisely'.

Dialogue facilitators usually invest a considerable amount of time in stimulating the participants to discover common ground, overcome language barriers (i.e. style, articulation, specialised jargon), and co-create shared meanings (Isaacs, 1999). In dialogue, skilful facilitation helps the experts to transcend the shared vocabularies of their networks. In such situation, experts become co-facilitators of the process of inquiry, assisting non-experts in the 'problematization and exploration of their own concerns and interests' (Fischer, 2003:216; see also Fischer, 2000:193-218; and Freire, 1970).

Collaborative dialogue within small groups of equals has always existed. However, its practice is still at the experimental stage in collaborative policy making which involves participants - with different power and knowledge - dealing with complex and conflictive issues (Innes & Booher, 2003, p.55). If as Heidlebaugh (2008:47) affirms, 'Dialogue is clearly suited to providing opportunities to generate new articulations of an issue or to challenge the vocabularies of dominant ideologies', then both the cynicism expressed by Mouffe and the suspicion of dialogue as manipulation must be put to the scrutiny of future action research. Karlsen and Villadsen (2008), in a critical study of dialogue as governmental technology, remind us of the *foucauldian* notion of the 'tactical polyvalence of discourse' (p.360). That is to say that the discursive practice of dialogue can also be used tactically, by those who were originally to be manipulated, to serve new emancipatory functions. In this sense, the discourse of dialogic communication 'may dislocate or open up relations of power' (Ibid).

## 7. Influence of (Scottish) culture

Dialogue initiatives – in both corporate and public arenas - have proliferated worldwide during the last two decades (i.e. Isaacs, 1999; OECD, 2003). Much of the work has been done in countries like Canada, USA or the Netherlands. This begs the question of the influence that culture has in making dialogue possible. In the UK, most dialogue initiatives belong to the realm of controversial science (i.e. Sciencewise, 2010), although there has also been some experience at local level and in the NHS (Involve, 2005; Barnes et al., 2007).

Members of the Forum expressed doubts on how the dialogic ethos may fit into the short-term political cycles that characterise Scottish politics. In that sense, they expressed that perhaps in other countries there is more room for long term processes that are not subsumed into adversarial politics. In a similar vein, Tannen (1999) has documented how confrontational modes of communication prevail in British and American socio-political culture. She calls it ‘the argument culture’, which is characterised by :

*“How may  
dialogue fit into  
the short-term  
political cycles  
that characterise  
Scottish  
politics?”*

‘using opposition to accomplish *every* goal, even those that do not require fighting but might also (better) be accomplished by other means, such as exploring, expanding, discussing, investigating, and the exchanging of ideas suggested by the word “dialogue”. I am questioning the assumption that *everything* is a matter of polarized opposites, the proverbial “two sides to every question” that we think embodies open-mindedness and expansive thinking’ (p.10; italics in the original).

We can certainly recognise this mindset behind many media outputs and political ritualised spectacles.

However, the Forum also recognised that Scottish culture is characterised by certain communitarian ethos that is rooted in its history, and that it should provide fertile soil for cultivating dialogue practices. This constitutes an area for research that the Centre for Dialogue will pursue in the future.

The participants in the Forum provided already some interesting starting points by sharing their own experiences. For some, lack of confidence, or hesitation in speaking out in the Scottish character was seen as a cultural barrier to dialogue taking place. Accordingly, some

participants pointed out that people need to be given the self confidence to speak up for themselves and given the assurance that they will be listened to. There were also points made around an overall lack of listening skills, and the need to be able to handle the feelings involved in challenging other people's views and having their own challenged. Speaking up in groups was acknowledged as being very difficult, and the operation of 'group think' in focus groups and in other situations was seen as problematic, and as distorting communication processes where individuals cannot intervene with perspectives that contradict those shared by the dominant or most articulate members of the group. Certain skills necessary to engage in dialogue – such as being able to articulate feelings and positions - were seen to be lacking in Scottish children and adults. Some participants insisted that to inculcate a dialogic culture we must start with children - introducing good models of inquiring and listening.

*“What skills do Scots need to engage in dialogue?”*

Many of these reflections resonate with research from Diana Mutz (2007). It is generally taken for granted that more citizen participation in the public sphere will necessarily increase the practice of dialogue and deliberation (D+D). In D+D processes people is exposed to diverse points of view that often put into question their perspectives and values. Mutz's research offers a range of consistent findings showing that 'cross-cutting exposure discourages political participation' (p. 114). In other words, citizens are keener to participate in initiatives that involve like-minded individuals. This poses clear challenges for communication practitioners.

However, Mutz's research refers to deliberative practice, where debate and polarised argument prevail. Dialogue formats and processes strive to craft spaces where dissent and difference are welcomed as part of the learning experience. Indeed, much of the time invested in preparing a dialogue process goes into encouraging appropriate mindsets, sharing ways of suspending automatic response, and trying to frame the encounter as a 'meeting of minds', rather than as a contest of opposites.

Dialogue facilitators often enthuse participants by making them realise the novelty of the approach, and by inviting them to suspend disbelief and try out something different. This usually gets the process started; then, of course, other ongoing variables will determine its development. In any case, if what often keeps citizens away from engaging is the perception of the process as being unpleasant and adversarial, then it makes sense to strive to

change the quality of communication that characterises the process.

Finally, the Forum also signalled concerns regarding the outcome-driven Scottish organisational culture. However, as we hope we have made clear by now, dialogue processes can deliver substantial outcomes in appropriate circumstances. The main difference is the way in which those outcomes are defined and delivered.

## 8. Concluding remarks

Dialogue is only one among many other forms of communication available to organisations and communities, for instance: public relations campaigns, information-giving, persuasion, consultation, negotiation, participation (i.e. referendums), deliberative processes (i.e. community planning, consensus conferences), or collaborative policy making (i.e. partnerships).

A dialogic orientation can contribute to enhance some of these forms of communication. However, as we have said, dialogue processes take time and resources, and are not always appropriate for traditionally outcome-driven or strategic approaches. The open-ended nature of dialogue, alongside with its power-sharing ethos, makes it a risky move for organisations that lack facilitative leadership and flexibility for manoeuvre.

In turn, that risk is precisely what confers to dialogue its immense potential. It may open up unforeseen possibilities as a result of stimulating collective intelligence and creativity. It may build robust collaborative platforms through co-constructed processes infused with broad legitimacy. In other words, it may contribute to enrich the communication fabric of our communities and organisations, and hence to revitalise our worlds, too often dominated by instrumental, *I-/It* relationships.

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